

POLYCYCLIC AROMATIC HYDROCARBONS (PAHs)

Also known as: Polynuclear Aromatic Hydrocarbons, PNA, Polyaromatic Hydrocarbons

Examples: Benzo(a)pyrene, Benzanthracene, Benzo(b)fluoranthene, Fluoranthene, Naphthalene

WHAT ARE PAHs?

PAHs are a group of approximately 10,000 compounds, a few of which are listed above. Most PAHs in the environment are from incomplete burning of carbon-containing materials like oil, wood, garbage or coal. Many useful products such as mothballs, blacktop, and creosote wood preservatives contain PAHs. They are also found at low concentrations in some special-purpose skin creams and anti-dandruff shampoos that contain coal tars.

Automobile exhaust, industrial emissions and smoke from burning wood, charcoal and tobacco contain high levels of PAHs. In general, more PAHs form when materials burn at low temperatures, such as in wood fires or cigarettes. High-temperature furnaces produce fewer PAHs.

Fires can form fine PAH particles. They bind to ash particles and can move long distances through the air. Some PAHs can dissolve in water. PAHs can enter groundwater from ash, tar, or creosote that is improperly disposed in landfills.

HOW ARE PEOPLE EXPOSED TO PAHs?

Breathing: Most people are exposed to PAHs when they breathe smoke, auto emissions or industrial exhausts. Most exhausts contain many different PAH compounds. People with the highest exposures are smokers, people who live or work with smokers, roofers, road builders and people who live near major highways or industrial sources.

Drinking/Eating: Charcoal-broiled foods, especially meats, are a source of some PAH exposure. Shellfish living in contaminated water may be another major source of exposure. PAHs may be in groundwater near disposal sites where construction wastes or ash are buried; people may be exposed by drinking this water. Vegetables do not take up significant amounts of PAHs that are in soil.

Touching: PAH can be absorbed through skin. Exposure can come from handling contaminated soil or bathing in contaminated water. Low levels of these chemicals may be absorbed when a person uses medicated skin cream or shampoo containing PAHs.

DO STANDARDS EXIST FOR REGULATING PAHs?

Water: Wisconsin has established drinking water standards for five PAHs: Anthracene - 3,000 parts per billion (ppb), Benzo(a)pyrene - 0.2 ppb, Benzo(b)fluoranthene - 0.2 ppb, Fluoranthene - 400 ppb and Fluorene - 400 ppb. We suggest you stop drinking water containing more than these amounts. If other PAHs are found in your drinking water, contact your local public health agency for advice.

Air: No standards exist for the amount of PAHs allowed in the air of homes. We use a formula to convert workplace limits to suggested home limits. Based on the formula, we recommend levels of PAHs in air be no higher than 0.004 parts per million (ppm).

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources regulates the amount of several PAHs that can be released by industries.

WILL EXPOSURE TO PAHs RESULT IN HARMFUL HEALTH EFFECTS?

The effects of breathing high concentrations of PAHs have not been studied. However, PAHs may be attached to dust or ash causing lung irritation. Skin contact with PAHs may cause redness, blistering, and peeling.

The following health effects can occur after several years of exposure to PAHs:

Cancer: Benzo(a)pyrene, a common PAH, is shown to cause lung and skin cancer in laboratory animals. Other PAHs are not known to have this effect. Extracts of various types of smoke containing PAHs caused lung tumors in laboratory animals. Cigarette smoke will cause lung cancer.

Reproductive Effects: Reproductive problems and problems in unborn babies' development have occurred in laboratory animals that were exposed to benzo(a)pyrene. Other PAHs have not been studied enough to determine whether they cause reproductive problems.

Organ Systems: A person's lungs, liver, skin, and kidneys can be damaged by exposure.

In general, chemicals affect the same organ systems in all people who are exposed. However, the seriousness of the effects may vary from person to person.

A person's reaction depends on several things, including individual health, heredity, previous exposure to chemicals including medicines, and personal habits such as smoking or drinking.

It's also important to consider the length of exposure to the chemical; the amount of chemical exposure; and whether the chemical was inhaled, touched, or eaten.

CAN A MEDICAL TEST DETERMINE EXPOSURE TO PAHs?

Many PAHs can be detected in blood or urine soon after exposure. Tests for these compounds are not routine and can only be performed using special equipment not usually found in doctor's offices. People who think they may have been exposed to PAHs for a long time should contact their physician. Blood tests of liver and kidney function are available. People exposed to PAHs in air may want to ask their doctor to consider having lung function tests done.

Seek medical advice if you have any symptoms that you think may be related to chemical exposure.

This fact sheet summarizes information about this chemical and is not a complete listing of all possible effects. It does not refer to work exposure or emergency situations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Poison Control Center, 800-815-8855
- Your local public health agency
- Division of Public Health, BEH, 1 West Wilson Street, Rm. 150, Madison, WI 53701-2659, (608) 266-1120 or Internet: <http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/eh>



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